

WESTERN INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S LIT- ERATURE IN ENGLISH, 1979-91

-MEERA BHATNAGAR

Indian literature like its civilization, reflects a diversity of races, sub-cultures and religions. Yet, within this diversity, exists a unified harmony that retains its very special imprint. The place of English is quite distinct in India, and it remains for all practical purposes the *lingua franca* of the educated throughout the country. Strange though it may seem, westernisation of the Indian educational system has been far greater since independence than during the British rule.

The western influence in children's literature has been overwhelming in India.

The French critic, Hazard, included in the term "children's literature" both literature specifically written for children, as well as that written for a general or even an adult audience, but which has been appropriated by child readers because of its appeal to them.

In the present day context, children's literature holds a special significance in Indian

literature as it very specifically reflects the totality of the mentality and values held by the society. Conscious efforts to develop children's literature began in India sometime towards the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th. Our contact with the West encouraged Indian writers to produce literature for children on scientific lines.

A pioneering effort in literature for children in English was introduced by Mr. Shankar. "Good books are the first necessities of the present generation of Indian children if they are to make a break-through in this tough and competitive world," said Mr. Shankar. In 1953, when he held a competition of "folk tales of India," he received as many as 800 entries. He then decided to set up a publishing house exclusively for children and he encouraged creative books for children ever since.

It is assumed and rightly so, that form and content go together to make the impact of the literary creation more profound. In fact, both are inseparable and are complementary to each other. The content has to undergo slight adjustment with style, approach, rhythm and representation in order to make the influence on form readily acceptable and easily assimilative. Western influence on children's literature was so profound during the second half of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century that almost every genre of creative writing underwent tremendous changes. New styles were bodily transported from the West and have been in use ever since.

The western writer developed a certain outlook towards life as a result of great materialistic changes that surged through the whole of the European and North American hemisphere. His counterparts in India, knowing fully well that real India resided in its villages and that industrial development here was in incipient stages, took up themes pertaining to life and industrial society. New terminology, supposedly born out

of urban settings, was discovered—strife torn mentality, alienation, fear, tension, strained nerves etc. and was frequently applied to critical appraisals.

Children solving mysteries and getting involved in some kind of adventure during the vacations, adventurous treks in deserted regions, school stories with ragging, midnight feasts etc are some of the themes in books which are popular with children today—e.g. books by Enid Blyton, Franklin W. Dixon's '*Hardy Boys*' and Carolyn Keene's '*Nancy Drew*' series. Working on almost the same themes and in the same manner, our Indian authors for children have written a number of fiction. For instance *The Kaziranga Trail* by A.K. Dutta revolves around three boys who help the forest authorities to curb the activities of poachers who go about killing wild animals for money. Western influence is also seen in the terms that have been used throughout the story. Like... "There were chowkidars, bearers in uniform...in the tourist lodge." This book by the well-known writer Arup Kumar Dutta which received Shankar's Gold Medal is remembered for many reasons. It was the first time that Children's Book Trust awarded a cash prize for this winning entry. Mr. Shankar himself gave the Gold Medal for the first time to the writer. And it was for the first time a suggestion was made to modify the size of books published by the Children's Book Trust, a suggestion which was readily accepted by Mr. Shankar. Since then, published books of Children's Book Trust are coming in the standard size seen today and have also gained in popularity. The co-relation between the book size and its accompanying popularity was made by Mrs. Manorama Jafa, the present editor of the journal, *Writer and Illustrator*.

Vanishing Trick at Chandipur by Nilima Sinha won the second prize in the competition for writers of children's books in the fiction category. The children, Sarika, Praveen and Sunil,

take a dangerous trail during the vacations to trace an urn which vanished into thin air. The inclusion of girls on these adventurous missions is an instance of western influence.

Western psychological writers pay due attention to experiences, but the 'experience' is subjective, conditioned and controlled by personal whims and subjective temperament. It is not an experience of a true social being and it has nothing to do with social objectivity. Stories presented by Dilip Salwi like "*A Passage to Antarctica*" follow the above criteria. "*A Passage to Antarctica*" is a science fiction book in which two young children, Neha and Ajai accompany a group of people on a voyage to Antarctica. In the author's own words, the whole set up is imaginary...there is no island with whaling stations in the latitude mentioned, and a colony at the Indian Station is merely a possibility...." The terminology used is also progressive in the western sense.

For the Green Planet by Ira Saxena too is a science fiction in which aliens from the planet 'Vercusedfor', step on the green mother earth to help it from being converted into a desert land. Being a book for children, it becomes essential to make the children Anu, Varun and Pranav act as mediators or go-betweens in the whole drama which has been preplanned to the very smallest detail. The Western influence is seen in the manner in which the author has used amusing tongue-twisters in the terminology, like 'The Andromeda Galaxy', planet 'Vercusedfor', 'teaching of Cosmyhyv', 'my mother is Comster.'

In the works of Sigrun Srivastava like *The Ghost Rider of Darbhanga*, *Music behind the Doors*, there is present a continuous search for social justice. In Britain and America, famous film personalities contribute much of their time to programmes pertaining to human rights and cruelty to animals.

Music Behind Doors is the story of a father

who struggles to save his child from the world of superstitions which erode the very fabric of human existence.

The Ghost Rider of Darbhanga is the story of a notorious dacoit who holds the whole of Darbhanga to ransom until the day someone dares to 'catch the bull by its horns'. In both the stories the writer has concentrated upon inner strife, tension, and self centered emotions within the context of social reality.

The wave of western influence can be witnessed in children's literature mainly in the extent to which presentation and stylisation are concerned. *My Land of Gold* (1982), by Ms. Manorama Jafa is a good example representing this influence. The writer has assimilated various influences from within and without into an integrated whole. The formal plot structure in the story reminds one of the works of Charles Dickens.

My Land of Gold is the story of the people of Bangladesh who were waging a relentless war against foreign domination. The theme is sober and realistic, but, the title of the book is majestic and hypnotic which reveals nothing about the "hair raising experience of the 1971 war." The presentation aspect that the westerners so much emphasize is well illustrated.

Another example representing the above influence is *Panther's Moon* (1991) by Ruskin Bond. It is the story of a village boy who very

bravely tackles a panther who is a man-eater and has put the whole village into a state of panic. The story-title, as in the above story, is attractive and enterprising. Other instances of western influence are seen in the environment of the small village which is complete with mission-hospital, post office, school, shops etc.

The inextricable mix of myth and reality, flights of imagination and live picturisation throughout the books leaves a binding impression on the reader's mind.

A passing but significant reference to certain terminology which is defiantly western in nature is necessary. A wide Indian public reads and appreciates stories that are written in English by Indian authors. Most of these authors have adopted, absorbed European techniques and applied them with great success. However, terms like 'uncle', 'aunty', 'grandpa' have been freely used and they look out of place in the stories which have a purely Indian setting.

Naming child characters with names such as 'Rinky,' and 'Pinky' is frequently practised. Such names have no Indianness and moreover do not carry any gender value and therefore give the readers a vague notion. However, they do impart a universality to the character.

The future of any literature is of course in the hands of its writers. Children's literature in India is no exception.

- Although the language in picture books can be characterised by extreme economy, this is not to say that it is exempt from the usual canons of style. Good writing is a good writing at any level.

Sonia Landers